

John Pickstone: a personal tribute

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I met John in 1995. I had enrolled for the University of Manchester's unique M.A. in History and Social Anthropology of Science, Technology and Medicine, which was jointly run by the Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine and the Department of Social Anthropology. This degree was one of many interdisciplinary activities that John had initiated. Soon after my arrival, during one of several drink receptions that form an integral part of induction weeks at British universities, John treated me like an old friend. He seemed genuinely interested in what I had to say and offered me a funded Ph.D. project: he had been approached by an organisation of Swiss orthopaedic surgeons who wanted their history written, the AO (Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Osteosynthesefragen). It was necessary to read German to do this. I decided that I was not ready to work on the history of the AO. The project went to the University of Freiburg, where Thomas Schlich turned it into a fine book, published in the book series that John edited¹.

The project John had in mind for me was a typical example of how his work on local Manchester issues extended outwards and eventually went global. He had developed an interest in orthopaedic surgery when researching his book on *Medicine and industrial society* while based at the institution down the road, University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology

1. Schlich, Thomas. Surgery, science and industry: a revolution in fracture care, 1950s-1990s. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; 2002.

(UMIST)². Following his Ph.D. and postdoctoral work on physiology in post-revolutionary France, John had joined UMIST's History of Science and Technology department in 1974. *Medicine and industrial society*, published in 1985, was a history of the hospitals in Manchester and the Northwest of England from the early eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century³. But the book was more than that: a companion in many ways to Robert Kargon's *Science in Victorian Manchester*, it demonstrated how integral medicine was to social life in this industrial city, and how industrialisation informed science and medicine⁴. *Medicine and industrial society* was intended to be the first volume of three, but John was far too busy initiating new projects to find the time for completing the other two volumes.

Many of the new projects were spin-offs from *Medicine and industrial society*. While researching the book he had come across the papers of the pioneering orthopaedic surgeon Harry Platt, Professor of Surgery at the University of Manchester from 1939. He successfully applied for funding for a research project on the history of orthopaedic surgery, appointing Roger Cooter as research associate⁵. This project, in turn, led to another successful funding application and ultimately a book, in 2007, which John published with Julie Anderson and Francis Neary on one of the most successful medical innovations of the twentieth century: *Surgeons, manufacturers and patients: a transatlantic history of total hip replacement*⁶. This story, too, starts with a Manchester surgeon and finishes with a global medical device industry. John was keen to show that successful medical innovations could (and did) come out of public sector institutions, developed by people who did not work for profit. The project on which I worked with John, «Constructing Cancers», also had its roots in the history of Manchester hospitals⁷. John

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2. Pickstone, John V. *Medicine and industrial society: a history of hospital development in Manchester and its region, 1725–1946*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; 1985.
 3. Pickstone, n. 2.
 4. Kargon, Robert H. *Science in Victorian Manchester : enterprise and expertise*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; 1977.
 5. Cooter, Roger. *Surgery and society in peace and war: orthopaedics and the organization of modern medicine, 1880–1948*. Basingstoke: Macmillan; 1993.
 6. Anderson, Julie; Neary, Francis; Pickstone, John V. *Surgeons, manufacturers and patients: a transatlantic history of total hip replacement*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; 2007.
 7. Pickstone, John V. *Contested cumulations: configurations of cancer treatments through the twentieth century*. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. 2007; 81: 164–96.

had supervised a Ph.D. dissertation on radiotherapy in Britain in the 1980s, much of which focused on developments at the Christie Cancer Hospital⁸.

During my first few years at Manchester, however, John was occupied predominantly with *Ways of knowing*, his ambitious and innovative historical sociology of science, technology and medicine, which he was committed to publish in time for the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise⁹. As is evident from the name of our Centre, which he launched in 1986 after moving from UMIST to the University of Manchester, John believed in the value of integrating the histories of science, technology and medicine. And he followed the sociologist Nicolas Jewson in linking knowledge production to social and economic developments outside universities, hospitals, museums and laboratories¹⁰. In *Ways of knowing* he developed four ideal types (after Max Weber) of knowledge production that he suggested emerged from the fundamental changes which western societies underwent since the Enlightenment: «natural history», «analysis», «synthesis» and «technoscience». John argued that all these ways of knowing are still with us: scientific progress has not been about replacing the old with the new, but rather about displacing it, moving it sideways into different niches. *Ways of knowing* was a boldly synthetic book in an age of detailed case studies, for which John met with much scepticism, but was also much admired. He gave many talks, around the globe, trying to persuade others to apply his framework.

The third main pillar of John's work was political. This goes back to the 1970s and 1980s, when the university was an intensely political space. John has described the interdisciplinary constellations that characterised the intersections of academia and (health) politics in a long footnote to a chapter on «Radicalism, neoliberalism and biographical medicine»¹¹. In recent years his political engagement found its strongest impression in his

8. Murphy, Caroline C. S. A history of radiotherapy to 1950: cancer and radiotherapy in Britain 1850-1950. University of Manchester; 1986.

9. Pickstone, John V. *Ways of knowing: a new history of science, technology and medicine*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; 2000.

10. Jewson, Nicolas D. The disappearance of the sick-man from medical cosmology, 1770-1870. *Sociology*. 1976; 10: 225-44.

11. Pickstone, John V. Radicalism, neoliberalism and biographical medicine: constructions of English patients and patient histories around 1980 and now. In: Timmermann, Carsten; Toon, Elizabeth, eds. *Cancer patients, cancer pathways: Historical and sociological perspectives*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; 2012, p. 230-255.

interest in and work (with Stephanie Snow and others) on the contemporary history of medicine, and especially of the British National Health Service (NHS)¹². John felt that many of the NHS reforms of recent years were ill thought-through and not supported by evidence¹³. These reforms, he suggested, happened in such dizzying succession that those within the Health Service lost orientation. Historians of medicine, he argued, could and should provide useful evidence, and orientation.

Those of you who collaborated with him know that John's requests could sometimes be infuriating. His timing was not always great; he was very spontaneous, and each idea was very, very urgent. I worked out a strategy of dealing with such requests, and I am sure others did, too. In my experience, John was always open to criticism: if you had good arguments, he would listen. If that did not help, and I still did not agree with his request, I would sit on it for a while. There was a good chance that a new idea would come along and he would forget. John's friends at the University of Manchester and elsewhere will miss his very special brand of interdisciplinarity that emerged from encounters at conferences, in common rooms, cafés, even on buses or airplanes. Many of these he turned into projects, often unfinished — 15 filing cabinets in our department bear witness. John had something intelligent and enlightening to say on almost any issue. We will miss his intellect, imagination and synthetic mind, and above all his generosity and friendship. ■

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12. Snow, Stephanie J. «I've never found doctors to be a difficult bunch»: doctors, managers and NHS reorganisations in Manchester and Salford, 1948-2007. *Medical History*. 2013; 57: 65-86.
 13. Pickstone, John V. The rule of ignorance: a polemic on medicine, English health service policy, and history. *British Medical Journal*. 2011; 342: d997-d997.